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# THE AWAKENING

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX

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Is it not in *Alice in Wonderland* that some emphatic creature suggests that if he repeat a thing often enough it is true? So in the world about us when we hear things repeated so often that they seem to be in the air we breathe, we begin to realize that they stand for some actual fact in life. Nowadays we hear it repeated, on all sides, that there is the feeling of dawn in the air; of being at the beginning of a new era. As at the close of the nineteenth century there was a sense of decadence and of finalities, so there is about us now a new life, new standards, new beginnings. It is an age of the transvaluation of values, and more traditions are swept away, more reforms undertaken, more changes welcomed than in any age of history before.

Change is the sign of vitality, and we are facing changes every hour. We are clear-eyed and buoyant. There is no evil we do not face, and face hopeful of its destruction. We are recreating life with a vigor, a fearlessness, an intensity of purpose never before seen in the history of civilization. Not the French Revolution itself was a greater upheaval than the peaceful, straightforward, thoroughgoing reforms of to-day. Whereas violence was the mark of that revolution, seriousness is the insignia upon the up-breaking of to-day. We have ceased to regard resignation as a virtue and we no longer accept the inevitable. The fact is that, apart from death itself, men are beginning to feel that there is no inevitable. Indeed, President Eliot tells us the attitude toward death itself is changing. We feel young and buoyant and capable. To adjust the little matters of capital and labor, of marriage and divorce, of public and private morals, of business honor and social justice, is a serious but entirely hopeful undertaking.

Since, too, every step in progress begins by challenging

the validity of existing conditions and conceptions, and since progress depends absolutely upon accepting no stage of civilization as final and crystallized, the facts of life, social, moral, and intellectual, are thrown before the public as never before. Nothing is final and nothing is to be kept secret.

Long ago W. K. Clifford pointed out the dangers in the crystallization of racial customs:

"If we consider that a race, in proportion as it is plastic and capable of change, may be regarded as young and vigorous, while a race which is fixed, persistent in form, unable to change, is as surely effete, worn out, in peril of extinction, we shall see, I think, the immense importance to a nation of checking the growth of conventionalities. It is quite possible for conventional rules of action and conventional habits of thought to get such power that progress is impossible and the nation only fit to be improved away. In the face of such a danger, adds this witty scientist, '*it is not right to be proper.*'"

It is such dangers as this that modern life is apparently delivered from. Nowhere is the change more noticeable than upon the stage. The appeal of the stage being to the widest possible level of thinkers, it is usually the last institution to throw open its doors to new ideas because its verdicts never come from experts. The war waged against ideas in the interests of commercialism has been fierce and intense. For a time the spoils seemed undoubtedly to go with the latter force. To the keen observer of life, however, there is no doubt but that the pendulum has struck the high point of futility and is swinging back again. In literature, in painting, in sculpture, in all the arts there is a tendency again toward seriousness and reality of product. There is an ever-loosening hold upon the cheap, the tawdry, the sham product. We have suffered adequately from mere hollow appearances decked out as truths which flourished for a while in the nineteenth century; now they are simply laughed down and not accepted. We have demanded and are getting a change from the cheap and ready-made to what is indeed more costly at first, but also more permanent. Quick wit is no longer mistaken for real intellectual ability, for the power to think and think straight. A song and dance on the stage will not take the place of a play of ideas; the machine-made novel only fools the half-educated and cannot count its

readers in the hundred thousands. Nothing more helpful to general education has happened than the passing of "the best-seller." The change for the better is in the air. Better magazines are read and more cheap ones are going by the board.

The stage reflects, somewhat slowly and timidly, indeed, yet truthfully, the mind of average man; and where and when in the history of civilization could the themes now familiar to every theater-goer, to every frequenter even of the moving-picture show, have been presented before? Some years ago a Boston lady read, laughingly, the little preface to Brioux's "Damaged Goods." "When," she asked, "will such a piece dare to be spoken on English-speaking boards?" The answer of all those present was, "Never." Four years later "Damaged Goods" was being played all over the United States.

To be sure, the first stone was thrown as early as 1877, when Björnson published and had staged in Christiania his play, "The Gauntlet," demanding a single standard of morals; while Ibsen with his "Doll's House," a picture of the "parlor lady" without responsibilities, Hedda Gabler, the predatory woman, "Ghosts," a story of concealment and inheritance; Hauptmann, with his plays of social justice, carried on the method, while Strindberg wrote upon impossible subjects and in the "Intimate Theater" of Stockholm managed to lay the foundations of the new theater of ideas.

A great dramatic revival began with Shaw in England and was continued by Barker, Galsworthy, and Besier. Things half known and never expressed are pictured for the public, and the question is urgent, "What will you do about this?"

"Social forces lie deep," says a modern writer upon the drama. "They are not on the surface; they are the true history of any movement. Hence it is not cleverness, but understanding, they require for their full and ample explanation."

The old presupposition that *life* was by its nature divorced from *ideas*, and that drama was divorced from literature, has been destroyed by such practice as that of the modern English school of playwrights, and in its wake, less serious, indeed, less capable and artistic, but awakened at last, come the recent American dramatists.

Zoë Akins has published a comedy "Papa" somewhat

overdrawn, indeed, yet pointing directly at definite forms of social abuse. It is lively and amusing enough to pass for sheer comedy verging upon farce, and yet there is an under-current of satire and criticism of ideals which places her play under the head of the new drama.

George Bronson-Howard in his "Red Light of Mars" is plunging head foremost, with no little general splashing, into modern ideas and new ideals.

"Sentiment, always sentiment, maudlin sentiment, that's what keeps abuses unrectified, men ignorant, women slaves, the world's intellect developing no faster than a snail crawls," he writes. The tone here is, of course, directly drawn from Shaw, and the devil's indictment of Christianity, under which men called hate—anger against the heathen; lust—the Woman leading on to Holier Things; greed—world-conquest in your name, indicates somewhat crudely the latest transvaluation of values.

These plays completely contradict the statement of Montrose J. Moses in his volume on *The American Dramatist*, that "not one of our American dramatists can thus far boast of challenging thought or of rousing public interest, other than that of fictitious excitement."

Veiller's two successes, "Within the Law" and "The Fight," as well as Scarborough's "Lure," certainly have challenged thought. Again, Mr. Moses's insistence upon the necessity of stage technique is contradicted by Mr. Maugham's congratulations upon the American dramatists' freedom from just such hampering rules and regulations.

The changes brought about upon the stage, that last rampart of popular prejudice, are nowhere more apparent than in the books about the drama; so that books of even two and three years ago seem hopelessly antiquated and have no weight at all under modern conditions. More and more the stage, following in the wake of literature and religion, is coping freely and boldly with ideas; more and more is it an awakener, a provider of real thought.

More and more do play-goers look for what Mr. Clayton Hamilton calls the "sacred intention of permanence" in the play, and more and more is it true, as Mr. Percy Mackaye has said, that "true democracy is vitally concerned with beauty, and true art is vitally concerned with citizenship."

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.